Debate

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Between Pipes and Esposito

Shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy published a short book (137 pages) by Martin Kramer entitled *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*. Kramer is the editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, a journal founded by Daniel Pipes and others who feel that the discipline of Middle Eastern Studies, as practised in the United States, has become too pro-Arab and too 'dovish'. Kramer, a former director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, shares Pipes's views, though he has generally been less strident in expressing them. *Ivory Towers on Sand* is primarily a critique of scholars dealing with issues related to American foreign policy in the Middle East. Kramer is not especially troubled by current trends in the study of Sufi poetry.

Both Kramer and Pipes, like their intellectual mentor Bernard Lewis, view the Muslim world as inherently irrational, violent, and above all, anti-Semitic. The Arabs in particular only understand force. They will behave only if they are beaten mercilessly. The American government should not waste time trying to address their alleged grievances, or those of Muslims in general, because these all boil down to primitive hatred of the infidel and resentment that the infidel now dominates the believer instead of the other way around (Lewis 1990).This view of the Islamic world underlies the policies of the Sharon government in Israel and the policies favoured by at least some members of the American administration. So the issues at stake are by no means strictly academic.

Changes in policy

It is of course natural that Kramer and Pipes disapprove of most American scholarship on contemporary Middle Eastern politics in recent decades. American scholars, like most of their European and Israeli colleagues, generally reject the notion that brutal repression is invariably the best response to Islamic militancy, Palestinian nationalism, and the terrorism often associated with both. Most Middle East specialists in the United States would argue that to win the 'war on terrorism', it is necessary to dilute the rage that fuels it. This would entail significant changes in American and Israeli foreign policy. (There are many Middle East specialists who would take issue with the very notion of a 'war on terrorism'.)

Kramer contends that the 'paradigms' of American Middle East experts 'have been swept away by events' (Kramer 2001: 2). One could say the same of the Pipes-Kramer paradigm. Ariel Sharon invaded Lebanon to eliminate Palestinian terrorism by force in 1982. He is still using the same methods for the same purpose twenty years and thousands of deaths later. Yossi Sarid, the head of Israel's Meretz party, has noted that Israel's war in southern Lebanon 'killed more than 1,000 Israeli soldiers' and 'created Hizbollah' (Sarid 2001). Rather than eliminate anti-Israeli terrorism, Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon created an entirely new form of it among the Lebanese Shi'ites, who initially welcomed the Israelis in 1982. Former heads of Israel's General Security Service, Shin Bet Ami Ayalon and Carmi Gillon, have repeatedly stressed that Palestinian terrorism is the product of despair (Gillon 1999; Eldar 2001). Yet Kramer and Pipes advocate policies that would increase that despair.

Nevertheless, no matter how mistaken Kramer and Pipes may be in terms of the policies they advocate, some of their criticisms of Middle Eastern Studies in the United States are valid. Many American specialists on the Middle East are so determined to rebut popular stereotypes about Islam that they idealize all things Islamic, especially the militant movements commonly referred to as 'fundamentalist' or 'Islamist'. Scholars like John Esposito do ignore or downplay the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that pervade the Islamist literature (Munson 1996). They do ignore or downplay the threat that such movements pose to human rights as well as to the possibility of resolving the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Moreover, while Kramer exaggerates the impact of Edward Said's Orientalism on political science (Gause 2002), it is true that any scholar who dares to discuss discrimination against the Baha'is in Iran, slavery in the Sudan, or the Islamists' persecution of intellectuals in Egypt runs the risk of being called an 'Orientalist', a 'Zionist', or an agent of American imperialism. Conversely, of course, anyone who dares to criticize the policies of Ariel Sharon runs the risk of being called an anti-Semite or a self-hating Jew.

The field of Middle Eastern Studies has become politicized and polarized between two forms of moral myopia represented by Daniel Pipes on the one hand and John Esposito on the other. Reading Pipes, one could easily believe that Muslim hostility toward Israel is simply a matter of anti-Semitism. Reading Esposito, one would never know that anti-Semitism is indeed a serious problem in the Islamic world. Pipes demonizes Islamic militancy without analysing the various social, nationalistic, and religious grievances that fuel it (see Pipes 1996). Esposito idealizes Islamic militancy while downplaying the bigotry, fanaticism, and violence associated with it (see Esposito 1999). Students of Islamic militancy need to avoid both Pipes's demonization and Esposito's idealization.

The rage that fuels

If we take, for example, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, we find that its charter borrows many of the classical shibboleths of European anti-Semitism. It contends that 'the enemies' have 'taken control of the world media' and were 'behind the French revolution, the communist revolution, and most of the revolutions we have heard about' (presumably, Iran's Islamic revolution was an exception to the rule). The charter goes on to say that Zionists 'created secret organizations like the Masons, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, and the Bnai Brith throughout the world to destroy societies and promote Zionist interests'. These claims are followed by the usual assertions – usual in the Islamist literature at any rate – about how Jews caused World Wars I and II to profit from arms-dealing and 'ordered the creation of the United Nations and the Security Council to replace the League of Nations to rule the world through them' (Harub 1996: 298–99). To write about Hamas without mentioning such rhetoric would be to present a thoroughly sanitized and distorted picture of the movement.

At the same time, however, Hamas's hostility toward Israel is not simply the result of anti-Semitism. Hamas is, among other things, a nationalistic movement seeking liberation from what it sees as colonial rule. Hamas's charter says its supporters are Muslims who 'raised the banner of jihad in the face of the oppressors to free the country and the worshippers of God [*al-ʿibad*] from their pollution, filth, and evil' (Ibid.: 289). In the minds of Hamas's supporters, the traditional dichotomy of Muslim versus Jew has now meshed with the dichotomy of 'oppressed' versus 'oppressor'.

Hamas grew out of the frustration engendered by the PLO's and then the Palestinian Authority's failures, both on the political and social fronts. The despair and rage that fuel Islamic militancy in the Gaza Strip have been graphically described by Amira Hass, who writes that 'support for the Islamic movement is closely tied to a sense of Palestinian impotence' (Hass 1999: 111). Ahmad Qurai', best-known as Abu 'Ala', was one of the principal Palestinian negotiators of the Oslo accords. When Israeli soldiers prevented him from travelling from Gaza to his home on the West Bank, he reportedly declared: 'Soon, I too will join Hamas' (Kapeliouk 1996: 201). Abu 'Ala' did not really mean this. He was simply expressing the popular view of Hamas as the voice of Palestinians fed up with life in the West Bank and Gaza. (Palestinian Christians obviously have to find other voices.)

In addition to expressing the rage and despair of Palestinians unable to leave their towns without enduring humiliating interrogations at Israeli checkpoints, Hamas has also provided social services not adequately provided by the Palestinian Authority (Hass 1999; Roy 2000). The documentary film *Nahnu Jund Allah* (We are God's Soldiers) shows a Hamas social worker giving an unemployed man food to feed his family for weeks while also trying to help him find work. This too is part of the Hamas story.

In short, Hamas is indeed a fanatical, anti-Semitic terrorist organization. But it is also a response to a specific historical context. To understand it, one must see it in this context. The available evidence suggests that to reduce support for militant Islamic movements like Hamas, one has to dilute the despair and the rage that fuel them. This is not to say that brutal repression never succeeds or that radical educational reform is not needed to eradicate anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. But as a general rule, making people's lives unliveable is not an especially effective way to convince them to embrace life over death and moderation over militancy.

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